

Why a ‘Centre for Conservation Policy’?

The Policy Opportunity

Policy seems like arcane knowledge to many involved in ecological conservation; a potent and important discipline, but one understood only by a few. However, in its simplest terms, policy encompasses the way we make decisions (versus simply the specific decisions that are made).

This makes ‘policy’ incredibly important for effective ecological conservation, because ensuring ecological systems can function sustainably cannot be addressed efficiently decision-by-decision. This is the ‘teach a person to fish’ approach to maintaining biodiversity through better land and resource management decisions.

Policy is sometimes assumed to function only at high levels and only through senior government officials, but all decisions that affect our ecosystems — both positively and negatively — are backed by policy. Environmental NGOs, industrial corporations, municipalities, agricultural producers all have policies — sets of rules and guidelines that frame how individual decisions will be made. Top-level legislation is a type of policy, but policy also includes information letters from the federal government, municipal area structure plans, a grazing management plan, conservation easement monitoring protocols, public land use zones, etc.

Policy can also be assumed to be just a *product*, rather than a *process*. The end result may be a document, but that document is the result of much work by many players sometimes over long time periods. The opportunities to work on behalf of ecological systems will appear many times in various ways throughout that process.

Despite being so fundamentally important, ensuring that policy supports conservation does not get the attention it needs. This is largely a result of capacity issues for organizations, knowledge gaps, data deficiencies, or simply not knowing where to start, or what it is that you don’t know. Very often the challenge is *translation*, when people speaking two languages (like ecology and economics) struggle to find common policy ground.

Addressing a Need

A need exists for an organization that can facilitate improvements in the creation and implementation of conservation policy such that biological diversity is better maintained or improved.

In this context, 'conservation policy' is policy that can both negatively and positively affect ecological systems. This includes policy initiatives titled with words like wildlife, watershed, ecosystem, etc., as well as those titled with words like land use, transportation, growth management, water use, development, food and fibre, recreation, etc.

'Improvements' means providing support both in developing policy guidance (with the intent of it being robust and effective), and in monitoring, assessing and adapting that policy guidance (to ensure it is, in fact, effective).

'Facilitating' that improvement means providing:

- Information (evidence is needed to support effective policy),
- Evaluation (policy exists but its effectiveness is unclear),
- Expertise (a need is identified, but the expertise is lacking), and/or
- Capacity (expertise exists, but the capacity to follow through does not).

Conservation

Ecological conservation means ensuring that the ecological processes and functions that support biodiversity persist over the long term by promoting the protection, restoration, and sustainable use of the underlying systems and what they provide.

It is important to recognize that the process of conservation is a 'hyphenated' one, meaning it requires many disciplines: conservation biology, conservation policy, wildlife conservation, water conservation, conservation communications, conservation law, conservation communities, and others.

Policy

The *Max Bell Foundation* has an excellent definition of 'public policy':

"Official decisions that guide the activities of organizations operating in the public interest. Such organizations include governments and non-profit organizations at the local, municipal, regional, provincial, and national levels.

For example, public policy decisions can be expressed as legislation, resolutions, regulations, by-laws, appropriations, court decisions, etc.

Public policy refers not only to decisions, but also the programs and administrative practices undertaken by organizations operating in the public interest."